

Hey Sports Fans! Have we gone too far?

I was driving home the other day listening to a sports radio show. The idea for this article came up during a heated discussion on the tenure of some college football coaches. The discussion was centered on whether these coaches should be fired because of their team and athletes performances. Listening to this discussion I thought it would be appropriate to talk about performance and coaches since our first meet is this coming weekend.

To give a little background on where I am coming from on this article I think it is important to go back in time about 15-years. In the early 90's a major league baseball player (Pudge Rodriguez I think) signed a contract that was worth more than 100 million dollars over the course of this player's career. Whether he was worth it or not it can be debated, but it signaled a very dangerous trend toward dollars and performance. A little less than a year later Kenny Rogers of the LA Dodgers inked a contract that was almost that amount. What was so shocking about this dollar amount is that Rogers was a pitcher! This contract was awarded to someone who played maybe 30 times during the course of a baseball season and at best won 60 % of those games. Whether you agree with the amount paid or not can be debated for weeks, but the point is that clubs were centering their success on one individual...or if you are the New York Yankees....several high priced players. This resulted in an immediate demand for success and great performances.

Coaches of these teams were put in a position to win games or face being fired. They had to, because you can only pay those salaries if you have people in the stands. Quickly coaches were being fired because those teams were not winning, not putting fans in the stands, and losing those important TV sponsorships. While not immediate, the long-term effect of front office management involving itself in the day-to-day management of the coaches and teams became evident. Coaches in baseball, football, basketball, and hockey became targets of "failed" seasons or performances. If they did not win over the course of maybe a year or two they were let go because the teams/colleges did not want to lose their investment in the multi-million dollar athletes or organizations under contract with that team.

Decisions about performance were being made driven on a dollar amount rather than performance. Let me illustrate this even more when you consider Pete Rose, whether you like him or not, who has the most hits in baseball history with over 4000 hits. His lifetime batting average was .303. That meant that he got a hit a little over 30 % of the time. Rose at the pinnacle of his career never made that kind of money. He played for performance. Let's take a look at Alex Rodriguez who has a contract of 250 million dollars. He has less than half the hits Pete Rose did and has batted slightly better over his career with a .304 average.

The point here is that you would expect someone being paid so much to get on base more often. Statistically, it can't happen. The averages over time indicate this. Ted Williams who had the best batting average was on base roughly 35% of the time he went to bat. Let's take a look at another well known sports icon, Michael Jordan. Over his career Jordan attempted over 24,500 shots. Of those shots he made just over 12,000 shots (48.1 %). That meant that he MISSED over 12,000 shots. Undoubtedly, Jordan was worth all 48 million dollars of his contract, but he still MISSED over 50% of his shots!

Yet, coaches were fired because of the lack of overall team and individual performances at the professional level. This began to trickle down to college athletics, especially in football and basketball. Just to name a few coaches who have been fired in college athletics because of a lack of performance. Ron Zook at the University of Florida was fired after two seasons and not being allowed to finish the second season. Like him or not, Bob Davie at Notre Dame (.548) and a bowl championship appearance his first season, Bob Huggins at the University of Cincinnati with a winning percentage of over .700. Granted two of these coaches had some extenuating circumstances that also led to their removal, but let's take a look at the current football season. Larry Coker at the University of Miami could end up fired at the end of this season if not before if they do not win more games...he still may be fired anyway. John L. Smith of Michigan State University has lost two very tough games, but his job may be in jeopardy at the end of this season because they could lose three more games to teams who are in the Nations top ten list.

Hold on to your hats here folks! Joe Paterno! This man has been the icon of Penn State football for over 5 decades! He is one of the all-time leaders in victories by coaches in NCAA football, but the fact of the matter is that if his team doesn't win more games this year he may be out as head coach even with a .745 winning percentage. This may or may not happen, but traditionally strong athletic programs at the college level are demanding more from their coaches. Why? Because there is so much pressure to perform and excel that at the college level the emphasis is on dollars and performance....to generate income to support the ever ballooning cost of having a good collegiate athletic program.

You may be asking yourself how this applies to age group swimming. The simple answer is that this trickle down effect is becoming more and more evident in youth and high school athletics. The drive of parents to have their children succeed at any cost is seen in the daily news. Parents in Texas letting their children take steroids so that they can become professional football players. Or the tragic death of the Texas teenager who took steroids so he could throw 'faster'. Sure these are extremes, but have we gone too far in our expectations of youth athletics?

Over the summer I heard rumors and confirmations of the firing of two coaches I know very well. Both coaches are tremendous individuals who have a combined 40 years of coaching experience. One was fired because the team was getting beat at meets at the local level and not sending enough swimmers to US Nationals. No reason was given for the other coach, who by the way, has been on US National team trips as well as being on future trip lists. Both these fine individuals are with other clubs now, but it begs the questions....have we gone too far, do we expect too much at the youth level of sports?

The simple answer is yes. Ask yourself the next time your child swims at a meet and the meet doesn't go so well...what were my expectations of my child? The same question holds true of us coaches too! If you answer that question with any performance related thought then you have gone too far. Like I have mentioned in a previous article related to parents and swimming and having had similar discussions with other parents in swimming. I have to say that we have no control over how well our kids swim. They are the ones who have to choose to swim and compete. It does not matter what we as coaches say, what you as parents say, or what kind of influence a child's friends may have, ultimately the child is responsible for their accomplishments.

The answer is also yes because we want the best for our children and want them to succeed to the highest level possible. Some might even say the Olympics. Let me give you some statistics that bring this line of thought into prospective though. Your child may have a 0.000003759398496240600 % chance of making an Olympic team. Statistically you stand a better chance of getting hit by lightning! Still not convinced?? Your child may have a 0.000000023644015699626 % chance of winning an Olympic gold medal or about the same odds as winning the lottery!

So are you asking yourself why should my child continue swimming? I will give you some more odds as that will help you as parents keep a better perspective the next time your child swims in a meet because those examples above are the extreme ends of swimming and sport. Everyone has much better odds of improving their personal swim times rather than winning an Olympic gold medal. But like professional and college sports we measure our successes by performances...only without the monetary payoff.

So using our professional and college sports as benchmarks for success, what percentage of improved swims at a meet are considered acceptable? If we use the batting average of some of baseballs best athletes then having a meet where we achieve 30 – 35 percent best times is a really good meet. If we use the shooting percentage of Michael Jordan then our swimmers should achieve best times 45 – 50 percent of the time. Even the Great One – Wayne Gretzky averaged about 40 – 45 percent on all the shots he made on a hockey net. These statistics are for professional athletes too and not young youth athletes. So the point of this article is what should we expect at most swim meets?

If your child achieves 30 – 40 percent best times they have had an OK meet. If they have achieved 40 – 50 percent best times, they have had a good weekend. If they manage to achieve 50 – 60 percent best times then they have had a very good meet. If they hit 60 – 70 percent best times then they have had a really good competition. If a swimmer manages 70 – 80 percent best times then they have had an excellent meet. Anything above that and your child was in the zone and nothing was going prevent them from being successful!

As you can see our statistical chances of improving our times are better than our expectations can be. Granted young athletes tend to be more inconsistent over a season and tend to have both extremes of competition, but we can be glad when overall we see that our child is improving from meet to meet and year to year. Remember, it takes time to be successful in athletics. Just ask Peter Rose, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, or Michael Phelps.